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FOR S, R, ECA, NEA FROM AMBASSADOR

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TAGS: [OEXC](#) [KPAO](#) [SCUL](#) [OIIP](#) [XF](#) [KU](#) [STUDENT](#) [VISAS](#)

SUBJECT: Getting Foreign Students Back to U.S.

Universities: What We're Doing and What We're Learning

1. Summary/Recommendations: Over the last six months, Embassy Kuwait has begun a coordinated effort to reverse an alarming decline in the number of Kuwaiti students choosing U.S. colleges and universities. A significant percentage of current government, oil industry and private sector leadership in Kuwait hold U.S. degrees and hold the United States in very high regard. We have a strategic interest in making sure that the next generations of leaders in Kuwait have experienced the excellent educational opportunities in the U.S. And of equal importance, they will benefit from a sustained formative period when they can get to know what makes the U.S. tick, why Americans respond to the world in the way we do, and how democracy works in action. The United States also benefits from the personal interactions between American students and their counterparts from the Arab and Muslim world. In this report, we provide a summary description of what we are doing to address the problem of declining matriculations, and some of the preliminary lessons we have learned. We welcome feedback from other posts that are engaged in similar activities, as well as from Washington agencies and educational associations, such as NAFSA, AMIDEAST, IIE, and others.

2. Recommendations: We have two specific recommendations. First, the Department, (perhaps co-sponsored by U.S. educational bodies), should commission a market survey in the GCC countries (and elsewhere if desired) to learn more about what is influencing the choices students and parents in the Gulf make regarding higher education. As a government, we seem to be responding to this problem based largely on anecdotal information, not specific and recent data. Second, we recommend that the Secretary make a major address on the topic at a U.S. university. Secretary Rice's background in academia brings a new dimension to our efforts, and her personal involvement would add considerably to the visibility and credibility of efforts to bring more students to the U.S.  
(End Summary/Recommendations)

#### The Problem

3. Academic institutions and the media have been highlighting the loss of foreign students for some time. In the fall of 2004, Embassy Kuwait recognized that the problem in Kuwait was even worse than we imagined and that the precipitous drop in the number of Kuwaitis studying in U.S. colleges and universities needed to be addressed in a concerted fashion. The 35% drop in Kuwait enrolments in the U.S. since 9/11/2001, greater than the decline in Saudi Arabia, was alarming for two principal reasons: 1) the loss of the immediate/intensive exposure of young Kuwaitis to America and Americans, and 2) the long-term loss to the United States of a cadre of leaders in government, business, education and other sectors who receive not only a high quality education, but who understand American culture and the way Americans respond to the world. Given the gravity of the situation, we didn't have the luxury of sitting back and studying the problem before attacking it. So to a great extent we are learning as we go.

#### What We're Doing

4. In summary form, below are steps we have taken to encourage more students to study in the U.S.:

-- Under the leadership of the Ambassador, formed an interdisciplinary group within the mission to develop and implement actions. The Cultural Attach is the Executive Director of the Group, with participation by the DCM, CONS, FCS, PD, Office of Military Cooperation, POL, and ECON.

-- Developed a stronger working relationship with AMIDEAST Kuwait, which is the designated educational testing and counseling agent in Kuwait. AMIDEAST personnel help us diagnose the problems, provide advice on strategy and help in program implementation. We cooperate closely with AMIDEAST in orientation and counseling programs.

-- Developed links with the National Union of Kuwaiti

Students. This group, particularly its U.S. branch, is an excellent source of advice. The U.S. branch is also media-savvy, using their winter holiday vacation in Kuwait to host events, call on ministers, and give interviews. A lunch hosted by the Ambassador for them received excellent coverage, as did a speech by the Ambassador at one of their events.

-- Worked the press on the issue. We boiled down the Ambassador's speech to the Kuwaiti students into a long op-ed, which was carried in every daily.

-- Upgraded our Embassy website coverage of student issues, including visa info and counseling information. We also made a laminated card with web-based resources for more information on "Studying in the USA," that we distribute widely.

-- We opened an e-mail account, kwtstudyintheus@state.gov, for feedback from the public on student issues. (This account has not received as much input as we expected. We probably could market it better but it may not be a particularly useful tool for feedback.)

-- Started a list of distinguished Kuwaiti alumni of American universities and are including an on-line registration form on our public web site for alumni.

-- Started to encourage alumni chapters. This has been slow going in Kuwait, where the social life focuses more on families and friends than on affinity or professional organizations.

-- Participated in U.S. university recruiting events. Working with FCS and AMIDEAST, the Ambassador, PD officers and consular officers have participated in these events that have received good public coverage.

--- Expanded our Consular outreach to prospective students. Vice Consuls brief students and parent groups at recruiting events and other educational fora. This has been very successful in dispelling some of the myths about the difficulties in obtaining student visas.

-- Focused more attention on English language programs for youth. Besides addressing the key issue of attaining adequate TOEFL scores to study in U.S. schools, offering English language training affords an opportunity to discuss concerns about study in the U.S. (Our English language program is a key part of our overall outreach program to young Kuwaitis.)

-- Lobbied Kuwaiti officials to direct more scholarship students to the U.S. This has been an uphill battle, as the GOK is consciously diversifying choices for students and additional universities are opening in Kuwait and other GCC states. We are still pushing on a request requests to the Education Ministry for access for our educational advisors to offer voluntary presentations in local public high schools. AMIDEAST is already active in the elite private schools.

-- The Office of Military Cooperation - Kuwait (OMC-K), in conjunction with the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), proposed that the Kuwait Chief of Staff of the Military enable Kuwaiti students enrolled in U.S. colleges to participate in Reserve Officer Training Courses (ROTC) offered at U.S. colleges. The offer to Kuwait is for Kuwait students in the U.S. to be able to attend all of the U.S. ROTC requirements including the summer programs with U.S. military service components that U.S. students do. Upon completion of college and the ROTC curriculum, Kuwait would recognize the U.S. ROTC training by commissioning the Kuwaiti as an officer in the Kuwaiti Military. This is the first time such an initiative has been offered to a foreign country. At present, there is interest by the Kuwait Chief of Staff, but the offer has not yet been accepted.

#### What We're Learning

15. Many of the "lessons learned" below appear somewhat obvious, but they weren't obvious to us until we started to attack the problem and deal more systematically with the different actors. We still have considerable knowledge gaps in regard to motivating students to choose the U.S.

-- "Visa Fear" can be overcome. We believe we have turned the corner in convincing people that it is not inordinately difficult for qualified applicants to apply for and receive a student visa. This has been achieved through our outreach program and by giving priority to applicants for student visas. Clearance procedures have improved steadily in the last two years and wait times are down dramatically.

-- There is still some worry about treatment of Arabs in

the U.S. Parents don't want their children put at risk of intrusive treatment at U.S. immigration points or discrimination where they study. Even some Kuwaitis educated in the U.S. have shared with post their concern about sending their children to study in the U.S. because of fear of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiment in America. Talking to Kuwaitis who are studying in the U.S. has revealed this to be a minor problem, but the few negative experiences are the ones that are broadcast and amplified in the small and talkative Kuwaiti society. This misperception needs to be addressed continuously, stressing that the U.S. welcomes Arabs and Muslims as students and visitors, and providing examples of their success in the U.S.

-- Meet the Competition. The options for students are expanding quickly. A young Kuwaiti can now choose between two universities in Kuwait with American curricula: the American University of Kuwait and the Gulf University of Science and Technology, (associated with the University of Missouri-St. Louis), as well as an Australian college. They are also attracted to the American University in nearby Sharjah, UAE. In addition, the UK, Australia and others are perceived as easier to get into (no TOEFL or application fees in England) and these countries are eagerly recruiting in Kuwait using the selling points of easier admissions and visa processes.

-- U.S. schools are not in the market enough. Very few U.S. universities are taking advantage of FCS and privately managed educational recruiting missions to the Middle East. A recent FCS-assisted show had a considerable number of participants at its first stop in Dubai, but the numbers dropped off sharply for the second stop in Kuwait. It turned out the private firm organizing the events had subsidized the travel to Dubai. In addition, we have seen almost no evidence of U.S. institutions making use of Kuwaiti alumni for recruiting purposes.

-- The best recruiters are current students or recent grads. The recruiting effectiveness of a person in or close to the peer group of aspiring students is exponentially higher than that of an embassy officer or university official. We see this phenomenon over and over again at recruiting events.

-- There may be a big summer school market. Most Kuwaiti students do not come home from the U.S. to Kuwait in the summer. The heat deters them, so many attend summer classes and vacation in the U.S. We believe there may also be an untapped market for summer-only students, who would then be an ideal pool of potential candidates for subsequent full-time study in the U.S. Most of the summer students now are in English language programs, but this could be expanded with some good marketing.

-- PD educational programming ought to be continued, in part as a feeder system into U.S. higher education. ECA programs such as ACCESS (in-country English language programs for non-elite youth), YES (one year of high school in the U.S.) and PLUS (third and fourth year of undergraduate study in the U.S.) are ideal programs whose participants would desire and qualify for higher education in the U.S. Anecdotal evidence indicates that YES alumni, for example, desire to continue their college or university education in the U.S.

-- There is a need for more promotional materials and marketing. Private global media resources and Hi Magazine, Radio Sawa and Al-Hurra could be utilized for additional marketing or for features on studying in the U.S. Also, IIP and the Office of Broadcast Services may be ideal avenues for obtaining more high-quality and easy-to-use promotional materials on studying in the U.S. An attractive glossy magazine or brochure on the topic in Arabic and English for distribution, as well as a broadcast-quality documentary video in Arabic on "University Life in America" for broadcast on local and regional television, would be welcome additional tools for our on-the-ground efforts at increasing the numbers of Kuwaitis studying in the U.S.

LEBARON